

Forecasting Caucus Night 2016

There is a lot more that goes into forecasting the quadrennial Iowa Caucuses than just reading a bunch of poll numbers. We're going to talk about that this week. And, we'll read a bunch of poll numbers, too.

IOWA

In the Hawkeye State, the top of the presidential preference polls is as close as you can have them after nearly eight months of campaigning. It's what's happening just below the surface, however, that's beginning to tell the story.

First, here are the current 14-day polling averages:

1. Donald Trump
2. Ted Cruz
3. Marco Rubio
4. Ben Carson
5. Jeb Bush
6. Chris Christie
7. Rand Paul
- 8-t. Mike Huckabee
- 8-t. John Kasich
10. Carly Fiorina
11. Rick Santorum

As you can see, there hasn't been any change in the rankings, other than John Kasich moving up into a tie with Mike Huckabee, but everyone's averages are essentially the same as

they were a week ago, despite three new polls in the meantime. This kind of consistency is indicative of the polls “finding equilibrium.”

In other words, those who have decided, are probably pretty firmly decided. It’s what the undecided—and those whose opinions aren’t being captured by the current polling methodology—do that will turn the vote in Iowa.

Some say the polling is pretty accurate this time, however, that would mean a substantial departure from recent results. Others say the methodology, which has been impacted by the growth of social media and the era of “do not call” lists, cannot possibly capture an accurate assessment of such a crowded field.

That’s where observers need to use their eyes and ears to gauge what’s happening on the ground.

CAUCUS TURNOUT

Based on what we’re seeing on the ground in Iowa, we know the polls are probably missing some support for three candidates: Rick Santorum, Mike Huckabee, and Rand Paul. There’s no reason to believe any of them are going to win Iowa, but they will definitely out-perform their polling numbers.

Another factor to consider when projecting caucus turnout is the weather. In Iowa in the first week of February, it’s always cold. Some years, it’s much colder than others. Cold doesn’t really bother Iowans, or their caucus turnout, but severe weather—like a blizzard or an ice storm—will.

Currently, there is a slight chance of precipitation for Caucus Night, but the anticipated impacts are too difficult to predict with any accuracy at this time. Statewide impact is unlikely, given the short duration of the caucus event compared to an all-day election event, but a storm impacting a key region—particularly in western Iowa—could have a direct

impact on the vote totals.

As it stands right now, the prediction of a record turnout continues:

1. Donald Trump 44,000
2. Ted Cruz 40,500
3. Marco Rubio 11,000
4. Rick Santorum 8,000
5. Ben Carson 7,000
6. Mike Huckabee 6,500
7. Rand Paul 6,000
8. Jeb Bush 5,000
9. Chris Christie 4,500
10. Carly Fiorina 1,500
11. John Kasich 1,000

NEW HAMPSHIRE

In the Granite State, the big news continues to be John Kasich's surge. This is not good news for Marco Rubio or Jeb Bush, who will desperately need a top-three finish in both Iowa and New Hampshire to stay in the race:

1. Donald Trump
2. Marco Rubio
3. John Kasich
4. Ted Cruz
5. Chris Christie

6. Jeb Bush
7. Rand Paul
8. Carly Fiorina
9. Ben Carson
10. Rick Santorum
11. Mike Huckabee

Other than Kasich's big move, which doesn't show any signs of slowing down, the rest of the GOP field in New Hampshire—like in Iowa—appears to have reached equilibrium. The next big shake-up will happen in about two weeks, right after the Iowa Caucus, when the field will be much smaller and voters will have to resort to their second, third, or fourth picks.

SOUTH CAROLINA

In South Carolina, we have our first new poll in nearly a month, and surprisingly, it shows very little movement:

1. Donald Trump
2. Ted Cruz
3. Jeb Bush
4. Marco Rubio
5. Ben Carson
6. Chris Christie
- 7-t. Carly Fiorina
- 7-t. John Kasich
- 9-t. Mike Huckabee
- 9-t. Rand Paul

11. Rick Santorum

The two big movers have been Jeb Bush, who climbed back to third place in the Palmetto State, and Rand Paul, who has slipped to nearly the bottom of the field. Bush has established South Carolina as a “firewall” for his campaign, and has expended a lot of his remaining resources—it’s been suggested he’s already spent nearly \$100 million to date—on a top-two finish there.

Paul, on the other hand, hasn’t really lost a lot of support. The bottom half of the field is very tightly packed in South Carolina, where 3 points separate sixth from last place.

COMBINED AVERAGE

Here are the new combined 14-day polling averages for the early voting states:

1. Donald Trump
2. Ted Cruz
3. Marco Rubio
4. Jeb Bush
5. John Kasich
6. Ben Carson
7. Chris Christie
8. Rand Paul
9. Carly Fiorina
10. Mike Huckabee
11. Rick Santorum

NATIONAL

The national polling 14-day averages demonstrate that what is happening in the early voting states directly translates to the national perception of the race. National polls are virtually meaningless to the overall race, but do serve as a means of expressing the views of the rest of the country.

Right now, it seems Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina voters are probably doing a good job of reflecting the rest of the country:

1. Donald Trump
2. Ted Cruz
3. Marco Rubio
4. Ben Carson
5. Jeb Bush
6. Chris Christie
7. Carly Fiorina
- 8-t. Rand Paul
- 8-t. John Kasich
10. Mike Huckabee
11. Rick Santorum

DEMOCRATS

Hillary Clinton is now in a dogfight with Bernie Sanders. In Iowa, her lead is statistically irrelevant (it's within the margin of error), while observations on the ground indicate Sanders is doing a very good job of mobilizing left-wing voters. Clinton has shifted to the left in defense, which may alienate a good number of blue-collar Democrats who are socially conservative, but vote based on labor-related issues.

The current numbers in Iowa: Clinton percent, Sanders percent, and Martin O'Malley percent. In New Hampshire, Sanders is leading, percent to Clinton's percent, while O'Malley trails at percent. There haven't been any new South Carolina polls in the race since mid-December.